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ABSTRACT

Recent research on comparatives in the Muskogean language, Alabama, suggest similar work for Koasati, the language most closely related to Alabama. Koasati has a system parallel to that of Alabama. Although the actual morphemes used for comparative constructions in Koasati are almost identical to the ones used in Alabama, the syntax of such constructions differs widely between the two languages. Also, the usage of comparative constructions in texts suggests that the concept of "comparison" to the Koasati mind is quite different from that understood in English. (LB)

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KOASATI COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Geoffrey Kimball

Abstract: Recent work by Hardy and Davis (1988) on comparatives in Alabama has suggested similar work for the related language Koasati. Although the morphemes used for comparative constructions in Koasati are identical to the ones used in Alabama, the syntax of such constructions differs widely between the two languages. Furthermore, the usage of comparative constructions in texts suggests that the concept of "comparison" to the Koasati mind is quite different from that understood in English.

Introduction

Hardy and Davis, in the 1988 article "Comparatives in Alabama," have sketched out the complex system for making comparisons in that Muskogean language. Koasati,[1] the Muskogean language most closely related to Alabama, has a system parallel to that of Alabama; however, although the actual morphemes are almost identical, the syntax and usage are strikingly different from that of Alabama.

Koasati Comparative Formation

In contrast to Alabama, where there are two different morphological patterns for forming comparative constructions (one using the prefix *ist-* and other the verb *mayya*), there is only one morphological pattern in Koasati. A comparative is formed by joining the adjectival word (all of which are verbs) to the verb *má:yan* 'to be more' with the connective suffixes *-k* or *-t*,[2] as in the following examples:

(1) ca-pálki-k im-má:ya-l-o-V̨
1sstat:subj-BE:FAST-ss 3dat-BE:MORE-1ss-be-phr:term[3]

/capálkik immá:yalǫ/

'I am faster than he.'

(2) ca-pálki-t im-má:ya-l-o-V̨
1sstat:subj-BE:FAST-conn 3dat-BE:MORE-1ss-be-phr:term

/capálkit immá:yalǫ/

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'I am fastest.'

As may be observed, the dative prefix *im-* added to the verb *má:yan* cross-references the noun to which the comparison is made; in addition, the suffix *-k* on the adjective marks the comparative degree, while the suffix *-t* marks the superlative. This construction is parallel to the Alabama comparative construction with the verb *mayya*, which, however, is used only for more complex constructions, as in the following (Hardy and Davis, 1988:222, example 27a):

(3) tii-ka-k kafi-n im-mayya-n isko-l-o
tea-For-K coffee-N IIIs-more:than-N drink-1Is-Asp[4]

'I drank more tea than coffee.'

Note the following Koasati parallels:

(4a) kafi-k im-má:ya-n ísko-l
COFFEE-subj 3dat-BE:MORE-sw DRINK-1ss

/kafik immáyan ískol/

'I drink more coffee than he does.'

(4b) kafi-k tíyka im-má:ya-n ísko-l
COFFEE-subj TEA 3dat-BE:MORE-sw DRINK-1ss

/kafik tíyka immá:yan ískol/

'I drink more coffee than tea.'

At this point a major difference between the two languages becomes apparent. In Koasati, the verb *ma:yan* simply means 'to be more;' in Alabama *mayya* means 'to be more than.' The Koasati dative prefix *im-* covers the semantics of the English comparative conjunction 'than,' while in Alabama the semantics of 'than' are included in the verb itself, leaving the dative prefix free for other uses. In addition, the Koasati dative prefix, in the absence of other information, by default refers to an animate noun. Furthermore, the dative prefix is more closely linked to the number of the referent in Koasati than it is in Alabama. This becomes apparent when the standard of comparison is a first or second person.

Alabama:

(5) Roy-ka-k isn-o-n im-mayya-n cha-choksonka-ti
Roy-For-K you-O-N III3s-more:than-N II1s-kiss-Asp

'Roy kissed me more than he kissed you.' (Hardy and Davis, 1988:222. example 28a)

Koasati:

(6) an-ná:ni-k ca-coksó:ka-k cim-má:ya-t
1sposs-MAN-subj 1sobj-KISS-ss 2sdat-BE:MORE-Past

/anná:nik cacoksó:kat cimmá:yat/

'My husband kissed me more than he kissed you.'

In the Alabama example, the dative singular pronoun prefix (III3s) cross-references a phrase rather than a noun: "What is compared here is the activity 'Roy kissing me' with 'Roy kissing you.' The III3s object agreement on the degree verb in (28)[(5)] reflects the clausal object 'Roy('s) kissing you.'" (Hardy and Davis, 1988:223). In Koasati, the comparison is made at the word level, using the second person singular dative pronoun: "My husband kissed me, and it was more than (he kissed) you." In Koasati, clause-level comparatives do not occur.

Another point of difference is the use of the Alabama marker of peripherality, *ist-*, with the verb *mayya*. There is an elaborate distinction in Alabama between the roles of participants in a narrative event as to whether both are directly involved in the narrative event, or whether one is central and the other peripheral. The prefix *ist-* is used to disambiguate these roles, as in the following two examples from Hardy and Davis (1988:225):

(7) Sali-k okɬipaspa ayamp-o-k maɬa-n ist-im-mayya-n
Sally-K clay pot-O-K Martha-N IST-III3s-more-N

Ø-ischoop-o[5]
3/3-sell-Asp

'Sally sold more pots than Martha.'

(8) Sali-k okɬipaspa ayamp-o-k maɬa-n im-mayya-n
Sally-K clay pot-O-K Martha-N III3s-more-N

Ø-ischoop-o
3/3-sell-Asp

'Sally sold pots for more than Martha.'

In Koasati, such disambiguation is done lexically, rather than morphologically, as shown in the following two examples, which are parallel to the Alabama examples above:

(9) asá:la-n ca-tacakkí im-má:ya-n scó:pa-t
BASKET-obj 1sposs-BROTHER 3dat-BE:MORE-sw SELL-Past

ca-fonó:si-k
1sposs-SISTER-subj

/asá:lan catacakkí immá:yan scó:pat cafonó:sik/

'My sister sold more baskets than my brother.'

(10) asá:la-n ca-tacakkí acíhba-k
BASKET-obj 1sposs-BROTHER BE:EXPENSIVE-ss

im-má:ya-n scó:pa-t ca-fonó:si-k
3dat-BE:MORE-sw SELL-Past 1sposs-SISTER-subj

/asá:lan catacakki acíhbak immá:yan scó:pat cafonó:sik/

'My sister sold baskets for more than my brother did.'

Not only is the lexical item *acíhban*, 'to be expensive,' used to disambiguate the two sentences, but the syntax differs markedly from the parallel Alabama constructions. Alabama preserves the more usual order of Subject, Object, Indirect Object, and Verb, while Koasati moves the Subject to a position after the Verb. This is the only word order that is considered acceptable to Koasati speakers; if the subject is moved to the head of the sentence, the utterance is then rejected as ungrammatical.

A further comparison in this regard is of interest. The following two examples are Hardy and Davis's (34) and (35)(1988:226):

(11) holikfa-n ayamp-o-n im-mayya-n ischoopa-l-o
shirt-N pot-O-N III3s-exceed-N sell-I1s-Asp

'I sold more shirts than pots.'

(12) holikfa-n ayamp-o-n st-im-mayya-n ischoopa-l-o
shirt-N pot-O-N IST-III3s-exceed-N sell-I1s-Asp

'I sold shirts for more than the pots.'

The following are semantically parallel Koasati examples:

(13) asá:la-k im-má:ya-n scó,l,p fitolbá
BASKET-subj 3dat-BE:MORE-sw SELL,1pls(IB), FAN

/asá:lak immá:yan scólp fitolbá/

'We sell more baskets than fans.'

(14) asá:la-k acíhba-k im-má:yan
BASKET-subj BE:EXPENSIVE-ss 3dat-BE:MORE-sw

scó,lp fitolbá
SELL,1pls(IB), FAN

/asá:lak acíhbak immá:yan scólp fitolbá/

'We sell more baskets than fans.'

In addition to the Koasati lexical disambiguation, a notable difference between the constructions in the two languages is the use of nominal clauses. In Alabama, where the comparison is made at the clausal level, both nouns are in the accusative case as objects of the verb *iscoopa* 'sell;' and the choice of which noun to which the comparison refers is marked by word order. In Koasati, on the other hand, the clause "baskets are more than fans" is the object of the verb *scó:pan*. The comparisons is made lexically, within the clause, so that the noun *asá:la* is in the nominative case, and the noun *fitolbá*, being cross-referenced by the dative prefix, is in the autonomous case, and case relations, not word order, indicate the comparison being made. A more literal rendering of (11) and (13) indicates the great difference between the constructions in the two languages:

(11a) I sold shirts and pots, shirts being more (in number).

(13a) The baskets that we sell are more (in number) than the fans.

Koasati and the Alabama Simple Comparative

The simple Alabama comparative is formed by the prefix *ist-* followed by the dative prefixes, all prefixed to the modifier, as in Hardy and Davis's example (6)(1988:211):

(15) Filip=ka=k alan-ka-n ist-im-Ø-cho=h=ba=hci[5]
Philip-For-K Alan-For-N IST-III3s-I3s-big=Ints=big-Asp

'Philip is bigger than Alan.'

In Koasati, this construction does not occur in the elicitation of comparative constructions; only forms with the verb *má:yan* are given. However, while working through a series of Koasati texts I collected, a parallel construction was found. This is given in the following example:

(16) sawá íl-ka-V́hco-k katí yámmi-má:mi-V́hci
RACCOON 1pls(1A)-SAY-habit-ss CAT BE:LIKE-dubit-prog

ilhicá-k akkámmitik katí
APPEARANCE-subj BE:THUS-conseq CAT

st-in-có:ba-V́hci
instr-3datBE:BIG-prog

/Sawá ilkáhcok, katí yámmimáhci ilhicák. Akkántik, katí stinco:báhci./

'We say "raccoon;" its appearance is like a cat. But this being so, it is big with regard to a cat.'

Although the temptation is to translate *katí stinco:báhci* as 'it is bigger than a cat,' to do so would be to violate the semantics of the language. The instrumental prefix *st-* indicates that there is a relationship taking place between the actor of the verb and something else, and the dative prefix *im-* indicates that a third person is that with which the relationship is taking place. The noun to which the dative prefix refers must be in the autonomous case; here, that noun is *katí*. The instrumental prefix combined with the dative prefix and the verb means 'with regard to X, it is Y,' and does not have a comparative meaning. A further example will clarify this assertion.

(17) nas-ho-ca-mánka-V́hco-,V́?V́,to ká:ha-:p opá-k
WHAT-distr-1sobj-CALL-habit-,Q,-IIIPast SAY-subj OWL-subj

támka st-im-mikkó mikkó-k
DARKNESS instr-3dat-BE:KING(nominalized) KING-subj

ómm-o-Ṿ ká:ha-:s st-im-míkko-V́hco-k óm
BE-be-phr:term SAY-IPast instr-3dat-BE:KING-habit-ss BE

ho-ká:ha-:fó:k-on ho-ci-mánka-V́hco-k ká:ha-:fó:k-on
distr-SAY-when-sw:foc distr-2sobj-CALL-habit-ss SAY-when-sw:foc

cissí-k
MOUSE-subj

/"Nashocamankahcó?tó?" ká:ha:p opák. "'Támka stimmikkó. Mikkók ómmq,' ká:ha:s. 'Stimmikkóhcok óm,' hoká:ha:fó:kon hocimankáhcok," ká:ha:fó:kon cissík./

"What is it that everyone calls me?" said Owl. "'King of Darkness. He must be a king,' they say. 'He is king with regard to it [darkness],' they call you when they speak," Mouse said.

The verb here is *míkkon* 'to be a chief or king.' It is derived from the noun *mikkó*, and semantically can take no comparison, as in English, where one cannot be *more king or *most king. However, this verb can take the same kind of instrumental prefix and dative prefix compound that an adjective like *có:ban*, 'to be big,' can. Thus, the following two constructions, taken from the two previous examples are semantically parallel:

(18a) katí st-im-có:ba-V́hci
CAT instr-3dat-BE:BIG-prog

'It is big with regard to a cat.'

(18b) támka st-im-míkko-V́hco-k óm.
DARKNESS instr-3dat-BE:KING-habit-ss BE

'He is king with regard to darkness.'

This construction, although parallel in morphology to Alabama, is in fact not a true comparative construction. Nonetheless, the examples point out the way in which a construction which relates two nouns to one another could change to refer to a comparison rather than to a relation.

Use of Comparatives in Koasati

With the elaborate comparative constructions available for use in the Koasati language, it comes as a surprise to find that, outside of conversation, comparative constructions are extremely rare; only about a dozen examples were recorded in hundreds of pages or texts. Why is this? It turns out, not that the Koasati do not make comparisons, but that they prefer to make comparisons of equality, rather than the comparisons of inequality that are sot typical of English. When a Koasati speaker intends to make a comparison, what she does is to make an equivalency between two items, and then to continue on, pointing out the differences. The following are a few of the numerous examples of this kind of comparison that can be found:

(19) opá yámmi-V́hci akkámmi-tik cokí:bo:si-V́hci
BARRED:OWL BE:LIKE-prog BE:SO-conseq BE:SMALL-prog

/Opá yáhci, akkántik cokí:bosci./

'It is like a barred owl, but it is small.'

(20) sakihpá ká:ha-li-V́hco-k ho:cí:fo-li-:k ilhicá
MINK SAY-1ss-habit-ss NAME-1ss-subjunc APPEARANCE

konó yámmi-V́hci akkámmi-tik
SKUNK BE:LIKE-prog BE:SO-conseq

pa:-hát-hí kko-t
loc-BE:WHITE-3neg(IIIA)-conn

/"Sakihpá," ká:halí hcok ho:cí:foli:k, ilhicá konó yáhci, akkántik pa:háthí kkot./

'I say, "mink,'when I name it; its appearance is like a skunk, but there is no white on its back.'

(21) yokbonó-p lahkó cobá yámmiV́hcon ónk
MOLE-new:top RAT BIG BE:LIKE-habit-sw BE(intrans)

akkámmi-tik ihá:ni-hayó í:sa-t
BE:SO-conseq EARTH-iness DWELL(pl)-conn

yomáhli-V́hcon ónk
GO:ABOUT(pl) BE(intrans)

/Yokbonóp lahkó cobá yáhcon ónk. Akkántik ihanhayó í:sat yomahlí hcon ónk./

'Moles are like large rats. But they go about dwelling within the earth.'

(22) saliklí ká:ha-t ho:cí:fo-tí lka-V́hci
SPARROW:HAWK SAY-conn NAME-1pls(IIICi)-prog

akkámmi-tik biyakká-si yámm-o:si-V́hci ínkǫ
BE:SO-conseq COOPER'S:HAWK-dim BE:LIKE-dim-prog NO

biyakká-p cokí:bo:s-o-t ómm-o-Ṿ
COOPER'S:HAWK-new:top BE:SMALL-be-conn BE-be-phr:term

akkámmi-tik kom-holcifó saliklí ká:ha-Vhci
BE:SO-conseq 1plposs-NAME SPARROW:HAWK SAY-prog

/"Saliklí," ká:hat ho:cí:fotilkáhci. Akkántik biyakkasí yámmosci, ínkǫ, biyakkáp cokí:bo:sot ómmǫ. Akkántik kǫholcifó "saliklí" ka:háhci./

'We say "sparrow hawk" naming it. But it is somewhat like a little cooper's hawk. Nonetheless our name for it is "sparrow hawk."'

The above examples indicate that the semantic field of comparison is one in which the mechanics of the language are subordinated to the culture of its speakers. Note the differences in what the Koasati says in the following translations, and what English speakers would prefer to say:

(19a) Koasati: 'It is like a barred owl, but it is small.'
English: 'It is smaller than a barred owl.'

(21a) Koasati: 'Moles are like large rats.'
English: 'Moles are like large rats;' or 'Moles are bigger than rats.'

(22a) Koasati: 'But it is somewhat like a little cooper's hawk.'
English: 'But it is smaller than a cooper's hawk.'

Conclusion

Koasati has been shown to have comparative constructions equivalent to those reported for Alabama. However, those comparative constructions differ markedly in syntax from comparable Alabama formations. In addition, a construction which is parallel to the most common of the Alabama comparative constructions has been shown not to have a comparative meaning, but a relational one. Finally, it is of great interest to note that, although Koasati grammar has the power to handle comparative constructions that are semantically parallel to those of English, its speakers prefer not to use that power, but rather prefer to make comparisons of equality, which are more congenial to Koasati thought and culture.

NOTES

1 Koasati is a Muskogean language presently spoken by 300 to 400 people, primarily in Allen Parish, Louisiana, near the town of Elton. My fieldwork on the language began in August 1977 and continues to the present; since August, 1988, my research has been supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, BNS-8719269.

I would like to thank Bel Abbey, Martha John, and Ruth Poncho for their assistance in learning their language, and also acknowledge the earlier aid given me by the late Nora Abbey and the late Ed John.

2 The use of the suffixes *-k* and *-t* to respectively mark a comparative and a superlative construction is a specialization of their general use. The suffix *-k* is normally used to indicate that the action of two verbs joined by the suffix occurs in a sequence, while the suffix *-t* is normally used to indicate that the action of the two verbs joined by the suffix takes place simultaneously.

3 The terminology used in the glosses of Koasati forms can be found in Kimball (1985:xxiii-xxviii).

4 The terminology used in glossing Alabama forms is that used by Hardy and Davis. A few typographical errors in the printed version of the paper have been tacitly corrected.

5 The null markers for the third person actor are placed before the roots of these verbs apparently for graphic convenience, as cross-reference markers for both the verbs *iscoopa* and *coba* are infixed into the root (Hardy and Montler, 1988).

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